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SUBJECT: LEBANON: AN ENTHUSIASTIC JUMBLATT TALKS ELECTORAL
POLITICS WITH DAS HALE

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison, for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Druze leader Walid Jumblatt received visiting NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary David Hale, Ambassador, and NEA Lebanon Desk Officer Matthew Irwin on December 18. Jumblatt delved into the details of intra-March 14 discussions on electoral strategy and candidate selection. He agreed that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) had no need for Russian MiGs, but said Moscow's offer provided a helpful morale boost to the LAF and March 14. End summary.

ELECTORAL ENGINEERING

¶2. (C) Jumblatt described progress in forging March 14 agreement on an electoral strategy and unified slate of candidates for the 2009 parliamentary elections. In Baabda, where Michel Aoun is strong and will be buoyed by a significant number of Shia votes, March 14 had agreed that its voters should back a slate of "independent and credible Christian candidates" including Edmond Gharios (son-in-law of political boss Michel Murr) and Salah Honein. "We can win Baabda if we get 55 percent of Christian votes."

¶3. (C) Kesrwan, on the other hand, was "not yet fixed," with a mixture of March 14-affiliated and independent but March 14-leaning candidates vying for the support of March 14 voters. March 14 has identified several independent Christians such as Mansour Ilbon and Neemat Frem (who continues to prevaricate on his candidacy) to back, but these candidates are insisting that March 14 stalwarts Samir Geagea, leader of the Lebanese Forces, and Amine Gemayel, head of the Kataeb party, not run their own candidates alongside the independents. In Ashrafiyeh (Beirut one), Jumblatt said that Nayla Tueni (daughter of assassinated An-Nahar editor and publisher Gibran Tueni) would run "and do well." Jumblatt discounted the possibility of peeling the Armenian Tashnaq party away from March 8. "The Armenians are hopeless, but we have to try."

¶4. (C) On the Druze heartland of the Chouf mountains, Jumblatt reiterated his position that Dory Chamoun (of Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party) was "entitled" to a

seat in parliament, and that George Adwan (of the Lebanese Forces) should stand aside, saying he'd asked Saad Hariri to help resolve the issue. He also noted he would continue meeting rival Druze leader Talal Arslan to preserve the peace in the Chouf, saying the Syrians were working actively, including via Wiam Wahhab, to instigate intra-Druze feuding.

15. (C) According to Jumblatt, President Sleiman has not yet decided whether to back his own slate of candidates. "He doesn't want to fail." Jumblatt said March 14 had promised to support any candidates backed by Sleiman, but that Sleiman "wants to check with March 8." In response to a question from Hale on the explanation for Michel Aoun's popularity, Jumblatt said that Lebanese Christians are scared. "Aoun comforts them. And his friends Michel Samaha (former pro-Syrian Information Minister) and Hagop Pakradounian (Tashnaq MP) are still pushing the idea of an alliance of minorities to protect the Christians." "And the idea that it's safer to be with the Syrians than against them," Hale added, eliciting a nod from Jumblatt.

16. (C) On the premiership, Jumblatt noted he'd been "intrigued" by former PM Najib Mikati's remarks with former U.S. President Jimmy Carter during Carter's recent visit to Beirut, in which the rather strong Syrian-aligned Mikati called Hizballah an unacceptable "state-within-a-state." "He's careful," said Jumblatt, "and a wheeler-dealer. He'll be prime minister in a March 8 government." Jumblatt also mentioned rumors that Hizballah was willing to accept Saad Hariri as head of a unity government, saying, "This is a smart move by Hizballah, but a trap for Saad." Asked by DAS

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Hale whether March 14 would join a national unity government in the event of a March 8 victory, Jumblatt responded, "I think so. To leave them on their own would be unwise."

MIG MALAISE

17. (C) "Do we need MiGs? No." Jumblatt said in reference to Russia's recently announced offer to provide 10 MiG-29s to the LAF. Hale responded that while the United States had always sought international support for the LAF, "this wasn't what we had in mind." Jumblatt agreed, but noted that the MiG offer had boosted LAF morale, and that they would help deter violence in Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps, citing as historical precedent the LAF's 1973 use of fighter jets to bomb Palestinian militants in the camps. "The M-60 tanks would be more helpful, but Sleiman says they cost \$10M each to refurbish," Jumblatt said. (Note: We corrected Jumblatt on the cost of the tanks -- slightly less than \$2M each -- but this was the second time we'd heard a misquoted price attributed to Sleiman cited as reason to reconsider the M-60 deal. End note.)

SECURITY ISSUES

17. (C) "Speaking of the camps, the situation is dangerous. (Hizballah Minister of Labor Mohamad) Fneish is supposed to be pro-Palestinian, but he won't let them work," said Jumblatt, referring to the Ministry of Labor's refusal to grant Lebanon's Palestinian refugees work permits that could help alleviate the economic hardships widely viewed as contributing to insecurity in the camps. Jumblatt noted that Hizballah security official Wafiq Safa continued to liaise with the LAF's Shi'a Deputy G2 Abbas Ibrahim, and said he did not expect Hizballah to instigate violence before the elections. On leadership dynamics within the Internal Security Forces (ISF), Jumblatt praised Wissam Hassan, the Hariri-aligned head of the ISF's Information Branch, but said he was an "upstart" who challenged the authority of ISF Commander General Ashraf Rifi.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) A bright-eyed Jumblatt interrupted lunch to return to parliament for a second round of voting on Constitutional Council candidates, literally jumping out of his seat and jogging out the door after receiving a call from advisor Marwan Hamadeh. He seemed pleased, even proud, that March 14 had begun to act as a proper majority during recent parliamentary debate on the Constitutional Council and budget. His renewed enthusiasm for political strategizing and the minutiae of electoral politics indicated to us that March 14 was increasingly confident and well organized, and that Jumblatt, a critical March 14 leader, is indeed beginning to shake off the effects of the Hizballah-instigated violence of May 2008.

¶9. (U) DAS Hale has cleared this message.

SISON